

LITERATURE.

ERNEST;
OR, THE CHILD OF DESTINY.

BY PAUL CREYTON.

(Concluded.)

CHAPTER VI.

M. DUVAL.

The father of Mademoiselle Marie Duval was a man who had seen perhaps fifty winters—proud, passionate, and headstrong, during his youth he had been guilty of nearly all the follies which are but too frequent at that period of life; but, after giving way to his passions for a season, he finally married, and becoming attached to the fireside of home, led an irreproachable life, which caused his youthful follies to be forgotten. His domestic happiness however, was not destined to flow on without interruption, for scarcely had he tasted of its delights, when the partner of his bosom died, leaving him, as a pledge of departed pleasures, Marie, an only child. M. Duval did not marry again, nor did he fall back into his former course of life, but concentrating his entire affections in his daughter, devoted his fortune and his leisure to give her a finished education, and to afford her all the happiness in his power. It had been his chief delight to see her grow up under his personal care, and to watch the development of her mental and physical powers; and now that she had become a woman, all his happiness was concentrated in her, as before it had been concentrated in her mother, whose image was so like her own.

It was several weeks after the interview between Ernest and Maurice Lambert, which we have just related, that the two friends made their appearance at the residence of M. Duval. Ernest, who had at last resolved to ask the hand of Marie of her father, was shown into the library of that gentleman, while Maurice remained in the parlor with Marie.

M. Duval was not a little surprised at the demand of Ernest, but yet he was not displeased. The fortune the young man would inherit from his adopted father, was by no means inconsiderable; and moreover, he knew Ernest to be every way qualified to make his daughter happy. In effect, he was on the point of giving his consent, when the young man interrupted him.

"Before deciding," said he, "you should know something of my history."

"What difference can that make?"

"None perhaps, but yet it may. At all events I deem it right for you to know who I am before you accept me as a son."

"What do you mean?" asked M. Duval, surprised.

"Perhaps you have not heard that I am only the adopted son of M. Clairret?"

"Indeed, I had not."

"So it is. I was received under his roof when I was seven years old."

"Well?"

"Before that, I had suffered privation and sorrow. To be frank, M. Duval, I am the son of a poor young girl, who loved, sacrificed all to the man of her choice, and was betrayed. In short, Monsieur, I am a natural child."

Having uttered this in a calm, low voice, Ernest remained with his arms folded upon his breast, watching the effect of his words on his companion.

M. Duval started and turned pale. Perhaps the recollection of his youthful vices crossed his brain; or it may be that his regard for Ernest was changed to contempt.

The two glanced at each other in silence. Duval was the first to speak.

"Your mother is dead?"

"My mother committed suicide!"

"Suicide!" echoed Duval.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ernest. "You are pale, agitated—you are horror-struck, I see. But if you knew my poor mother's history, you could excuse her crimes, which heaven has forgiven."

"Go on," murmured Duval.

"My mother was the daughter of respectable parents, who brought her up in the path of virtue and rectitude. But she had a woman's heart, and woman's weakness. The tempter came,

and having made her his own in heart, took advantage of her devotion and love, to steal away the jewel of honor. To hide her shame, she forsook her home in the country, and fled hither with her betrayer. A few months passed away, and her lover's attention and kindness half repaid her for the sacrifice she had made. But he became tired of her at last, visited her only at long intervals. When I was born into the world, his visits had ceased altogether.

"I have never learned how or where she lived during the first year after she left her father's house. I only know that her betrayer supported her elegantly, for he was a man of wealth. When he deserted her, he sent her a purse of gold, with a note, informing her that he should never come to her again, and requesting that she should never seek to find him out.

"This much of her history, my mother related to me when I was old enough to comprehend the peculiarity of our situation, and to have a curiosity to learn who she was, and if I had a father."

"After being abandoned by her betrayer, my mother, ashamed to return to her father's house supported herself and me with her needle. Soon the money he had left her was gone, and she was obliged to labor day and night to pay the rent of the little chamber into which she had removed, and to procure the necessaries of life.

"Although this was long ago, I have a distinct recollection of seeing her sitting over her work, which she plied with tears of sorrow in her eyes. Her face was pale, and when she looked at me, it wore an expression of such hopeless woe, that, young as I was, I could not refrain from throwing my arms about her neck, and shedding tears of sympathy upon her bosom, while I resolved in my heart to take vengeance some day on the author of her misfortunes.

"One day, when I was about six years old, she took me with her into the streets. At no great distance from the house in which we lived, we met a gentleman and a lady, leading a little girl between them. I should not have noticed them had not my mother clasped my hand convulsively, trembled violently, and sank fainting upon the pavement.

"Alarmed, I fell by her side, and supported her drooping head. In a moment she recovered, and casting her eyes about her saw the gentleman, at sight of whom she had fainted, and who had drawn near to learn the cause of her sudden illness. Their eyes met. My mother uttered a faint shriek; the gentleman started back. *Dieu!* I was in the presence of my father! And it was, doubtless, his wife and daughter by whom he was accompanied."

At this portion of his recital, Ernest paused and buried his face in his hands, lost in gloomy reflection. Had he not done so he would have beheld his companion agitated and fearfully pale.

The young man continued:

"After this event, my mother became more melancholy than she had ever been before. I saw her so, and with painful solicitude sought to drive away her sadness. Alas! little did I dream that her reason, having suffered so many and such terrible shocks, was tottering from its throne!

"About two weeks from the day we met my father in the street, I went one afternoon to play with the children of a poor woman with whom my mother had become acquainted. After three of four hours' absence from home, I returned, and ran joyfully up the stairs to meet my mother. I opened the door; she was lying upon our miserable bed, and I stepped softly, in order not to awaken her. I was greatly surprised at finding the window closed tightly, and a suffocating smell of charcoal in the room. There was a furnace in one corner; but the coal had burned away to embers. I was alarmed, but knew not the terrible meaning of what I saw.

"As I had often done before, I crept noiselessly to the bed in order to kiss my mother as she slept. Heavens! how I started back with terror! Her features were livid—distorted with agony! I touched her bosom—it was so cold that it sent a chill of horror through my frame!

"How wildly then did I call upon her name and strive to awaken her! But she did not answer me—she did not move—she did not even breathe. She was dead!

"Wild with terror, I fled from the room. A man was passing by the outer door; I threw myself upon my knees before him. I told him that my mother was dying, and besought him to come to her assistance. He raised me up; spoke to me kindly; I know not what he said; but when I ran back to my mother's room he followed me up the stairs.

"We reached our little chamber.

"Here she is," I said, throwing myself upon the corpse, and covering its blackened face with kisses.

"For several minutes I remained in a state of insensibility; I was half dead with grief and terror. On recovering my consciousness I looked up and saw the stranger bending over the dead body of my mother, and gazing upon her livid features with a glassy stare. God! why had I not noticed his face before? It was he who caused my mother to faint in the street—it was her betrayer, and my father!

"With an exclamation of horror he rushed from the room. I started after him, shook my little hand angrily to call him back, ran to overtake him—but my strength failed—he escaped, and I have never seen him since.

"I returned to my mother's room; gazed calmly upon the corpse, and, in the bitterness of my grief and rage, swore to spare no efforts to seek out my father—not to claim him as such, but to take revenge on him for my own and my mother's wrongs, when I should become a man.

"This is my history, M. Duval," continued Ernest, walking to and fro, excited, "and now I ask you, frankly, if you can grant me your daughter's hand in marriage."

"M. Duval made no reply, but, like a person stupified with horror, remained gazing upon the young man in silence.

"Speak," cried Ernest, anxiously, "can she be mine?"

M. Duval pressed his trembling hands upon his brow, and answered with a husky voice:

"Impossible! for she is your sister!"

"My sister!" echoed Ernest, pale as death.

"Yes—for I am Belfont—your father!"

CHAPTER VII.

FATHER AND SON.

For a moment Ernest was stupified and speechless, and his glaring eyes were fixed upon M. Duval—his father.

"Did I hear correctly?" he muttered, stepping abruptly forward. "You say you are my father?"

"I am," said Duval, firmly.

"Then hear me!" pursued the young man, in a passionate whisper. "I have sworn to punish the betrayer of my mother; for he acted basely, cowardly; and, Monsieur, if you are he, I insult and defy you on the spot!"

"How?" cried Duval, starting to his feet.

"You are a coward!" exclaimed Ernest, fiercely.

The fiery blood of rage mounted to the brow of M. Duval; he trembled with passion, strode furiously towards Ernest, but restrained himself because he was his son!

"Young man," he said, calmly, after a moment's pause, "I see that you would seek a quarrel with me, but insult me as you will, I cannot forget that I am your father."

"By heavens!" exclaimed Ernest, bitterly, "the memory of the relationship returns to your mind at a most happy moment, since you can use it as a smooth excuse for your cowardice. But why, may I ask, did you never think of this when I was starving with my mother in a miserable garret—when your son, as you call me, was in want of the necessaries of life? Your son!" continued the young man, striking the table fiercely; "yes! and for that very reason, your mortal enemy! Sir, now that I have found you out, my mother's wrongs shall not go unavenged!"

"Calm yourself, young man," said Duval, recovering his self-possession. "This is a subject which should not be handled rashly. In the first place, consider that, in spite of all your taunts and insults, I will never raise my hand against you."

"Because I am your son, and because you regard me with paternal tenderness!" said Ernest, with a sneer.

"I repeat it; I will never fight with you," pursued Duval. "I will not take your life, nei-

ther shall you take mine. Nay, do not start, but hear me. I acknowledge that I have done wrong, and that you have a right to hate me—to punish me; but my blood shall not be on your head. If Heaven wills it, I will die, but not by the hands of a son."

"If Heaven wills it—"

"Yes; if Heaven wills it, I will terminate my own existence—punish myself. Here is a chess-board; let us play a game. If you win, in less than twenty-four hours I shall be no more; if you lose, swear to pursue me no farther with your vengeance."

Ernest hesitated for a moment.

"It is well!" he exclaimed, at length; "let us play."

The chess-men were soon arranged. Both were excellent players, and now they exerted all their skill, for it was a fearful game—a game of life or death! Intensely did Ernest study the position of the blocks, for he thought of his mother's wrongs; but he was less calm than Duval, and therefore Duval won!

"Lost!" muttered the young man, after contemplating the last and decisive move of his adversary—"lost! and it is well, for now that I think of it, I could not kill you, for you are Marie's father!"

"And yours!"

"Beware!" cried Ernest; "for if you seek thus to remind me of our relationship, I may yet forget myself, and break my word. The game is played. Adieu!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SUICIDE.

It was evening when Ernest reached home. He spoke not to one of the family, but hastened to lock himself up in his room.

"So I have found my father!" he murmured to himself, "and he is the father of my Marie, too! God! is it possible that she whom I love so madly is my sister! Then our love itself is sinful—our bliss impossible! Oh! would we had never met!"

The unhappy young man paced to and fro, nearly maddened by the dark thoughts which crowded upon his brain. He was interrupted by a knocking at the door. A servant came to put a letter into his hands. He recognised Maurice's hand-writing and breaking it hastily open, read as follows:

"MY DEAR ERNEST:—Shame prevents me from coming to you to-night, for I cannot but feel that I have acted treacherously towards you. Whilst you were with M. Duval, I was alone with Marie. The conversation was of you, dear Ernest. Judge of my surprise when she told me that she could not be yours—that she loved another. Then I forgot my duty to you, and instead of pleading for you, fell upon my knees before her, and pleaded for myself; for you must know that I too have loved her—long loved her in secret. I told her how I had concealed my passion for your sake—how I had resolved to sacrifice my own happiness to promote your bliss.

"But if you love him not," said I, "O do not say that you love another! To him I could yield, but with another I will dispute until the last. For I love you as none other will or can."

"Do not curse me, Ernest, for acting thus: do not hate me when I say that Marie placed her lovely hand upon my own, and while tears of joy chased each other down her lovely cheek, confessed that, although she loved another beside you, that other was myself!

"Heavens! how can I describe my joy—in-toxication! But then, dear Ernest, I thought of you! Joy is no longer my lot—I am miserable—dying with remorse.

"Write immediately and say that you forgive me.

"Your devoted friend,

MAURICE."

Ernest read the letter twice, then sat down and wrote an answer.

"DEAREST FRIEND:—Accept my forgiveness my benediction, my love! You have acted nobly—worthily of yourself.

"When you read this, I shall be no more: but do not think that either you or Marie caused my death. Far from it! I wish you happiness, and should have been content to live for you, had not a circumstance happened this afternoon, which drives me to put an end to my existence.